Germany's Faustian Pact

(A continuation of *Faust in History and Legend*)

by Jillian Becker (September 2022)

Illustration to the Thomas Mann's 'Doctor Faustus,' Sergey Chaikun, 1991

To understand what happened in Europe in the twentieth century, the wars, the barbaric cruelty, the murder of tens of millions in cold blood; to diagnose the sickness that beset every country on the mainland of the continent, Germany most severely; to know why European man is dying a long slow death on his own heath, it is helpful to read the great German

writer Thomas Mann. In particular, his novel *The Magic Mountain* explicates the sick spirit of a decaying Europe recoiling from and wasting the vigor of its civilization. The story ends on the bloody battlefields of the First World War.[1] His later novel, *Doctor Faustus*, published in 1947, culminates in the defeat of Germany in the Second World War, with the nation's material and moral ruin—its having condemned itself to damnation.

The Faust figure is a German composer of music named Adrian Leverkühn.[2] The fictitious narrator of his story, Serenus Zeitblom, is a schoolmaster and classicist. As Leverkühn's close friend from their childhood on, he knows the composer intimately and is deeply attached to him. Though no musician himself, he has a profound understanding of music.

On leaving school in the late 19th century, young Serenus and Adrian enroll at the University of Halle to study theology. But Adrian soon abandons his studies to devote himself to composing.

Fearing that he is not gifted enough to fulfill his ambition, he conceives a terrible plan. He deliberately catches syphilis by insisting on having intercourse with an infected prostitute, in the hope and faith that it will cause him to become insane—because he believes madness is necessary to genius. This choice that he makes is his conscious bargain with evil, the selling of his soul to the Devil in exchange for the power to compose great music.

He imagines he has a conversation with the Devil by which the contract is confirmed.[3] The Devil will grant him twenty-four years from the day of their dialogue, years of "great time, mad time," "devil-time, genius-time," to create the astonishing works he can produce now that his faculty of reason has become deranged. He will know "the heights and the depths" of life, and so be filled with knowledge of "the truth" —the truth, that is, of subjective experience; of

emotion, for the expression of which music is the supreme art.

Thought and reason, the Devil explains to Adrian, are impediments to the creation of great Art. Adrian's art will be intuitive, "Dionysian" –meaning that it will spring from the instincts, from feeling, from the heart, not from the rational mind which can only produce dull conventional intellectual "Apollonian" works.[4] And he states plainly that the instinctive and the demonic are synonymous: "The demonic—the German word for that is the instincts", he says; and he speaks of "instinct—in short, the demonic".

The Devil assures him that all genius is demonic. "There is no *ingenium* that has nothing to do with hell," he says. What makes Art great is "enthusiasm unparalysed by thought or reason." Art, instinctive art, is anti-bourgeois, anti-civilization. And it is "made genuine by disease."[5]

"Creative, genius-giving disease [is] a thousand times dearer to life than plodding healthiness," this dark force many times declares or insinuates, speaking either as himself when he chats with brain-sick Adrian, or through the mouths of certain persons among teachers, friends and acquaintances. These devilish persons are aesthetes, sickly or deformed, one of them "slightly" consumptive. They praise instinctive "Dionysian" art as being best when least ethical. What they call "the blood and beauty" of brutal mass murder excites them intensely. A poet among them praises "obedience, violence, blood, and world-plunder."

Serenus Zeitblom is appalled by such opinions. He is a patriot; he serves his country unhesitatingly as a soldier in the First World War; but he is no enthusiast for war. He welcomes democracy when the Weimar republic is established. As Nazism rises in popularity, he deplores "the undermining of the bourgeois order." "The antithesis between aesthetics and ethics … largely dominated the cultural dialectics of the time," he writes. He dares to speak up for the ethical, for

truth and science, humanism, freedom, law and reason, to challenge the enthusiasts of apocalyptic chaos. But whenever he does, "the champions of the dynamic" –those feeble, ailing, aesthetes who adore brutality–"merely smiled a superior smile." He remarks, in total opposition to their point of view, that "aestheticism and barbarism are very close to each other".

How then does he react to the violence when it is reflected in the music of his much loved, greatly admired friend Adrian Leverkühn, the new music that roars terror–and also sorrows for it? He judges it to be "hellish" and "frightful", but at the same time "marvelous."

Adrian Leverkühn does achieve greatness. His works will be "immortal." They are magnificent, Zeitblom tells us; magnificent in their frightfulness. As the story advances through the decades, we understand that they reflect, express and finally lament the hellish events that are the history of twentieth century Germany. The Germans were seduced by the demonic. *The German nation* struck the Faustian bargain, sold its soul to the Devil.[6] (Germany, according to the Devil, was always intrinsically hellish. He tells the composer that "German is the Devil's favorite language" and "I am in fact German to the core.")

Leverkühn himself is not a symbol or personification of Germany, though his story is an allegory of Germany's sickness and descent into hell. He is a romantic, but he lacks the sadism of Germany's political romanticism. In his person he does no evil–though he thinks he does, believing that a little boy he loves, his sister's child, dies of meningitis *because* he loves him while loving is forbidden to him by his pact with the Devil. "I am wedded to Satan," he laments.

When his twenty-four years are near their end, he finishes his last composition, *The Lamentation of Dr Faustus.* "The most frightful lament ever set up on this earth," Zeitlblom writes

of it—and then goes on to praise it as a triumphant work of art, in "paradoxical" terms for both its "feeling" *and* its "intellectuality."

The composer invites a gathering—of friends, artists, the poet, admirers and critics of his work—to the house where he has lived not quite as a recluse but mostly in seclusion, to talk to them about the work. (Such a gathering at the doomed man's bidding when his end approaches is in most versions of the Faust story.) He tells them, in an archaic manner of speech, about his sinful Faustian pact, that he made it in order to become the great composer he is, and what it cost him in both physical and emotional anguish, and how his nephew had to pay for it. The little boy suffered because of what he, Adrian Leverkühn, had done, making his pact. He knows now that if a man will "invite the devil as guest," he "taketh the guilt of the time upon his shoulder." That causes Zeitblom to see him now as a martyr, paying the price, Christ-like, with his own body and soul, for the sins of his nation.

There is nothing the composer says to the guests that is not comprehensible to the reader of the book, but it is gibberish to the gathered crowd. One among them at last declares: "This man is mad." And so he is. His brain is corrupted by the syphilis he had believed would enhance it. He goes to the piano to play his *Lamentation* but as soon as he is seated he loses consciousness. His mind—by implication his soul—is lost.

In time he recovers consciousness but not sanity. He tries to drown himself but is saved. Zeitblom wonders if "a mystic idea of salvation" was behind the attempt. "The idea is familiar to the older theology and in particular to early Protestantism: namely, that those who had invoked the Devil could save their souls by 'yielding their bodies'." But this denial of predestination contradicts what Adrian in his raving has said of himself: "My froward soul in high mind and arrogance was on the way to Satan though my goal stood in doubt; and from youth up I worked towards him, as you must know, indeed, that *man is*

made for hell or blessedness, made and foredestined, and I was born for hell." [My emphasis.])

Adrian Leverkühn lives, demented, a "burnt-out husk" of the man he was, in the care of his mother, until 1940, when he dies aged fifty-five. Serenus Zeitblom mourns his dead friend and agonizes over the horrors his nation continues to perpetrate in the remaining five years of Hitler's Third Reich. He writes: "Germany, the hectic on her cheek [as a consumptive typically has], was reeling at the height of her dissolute triumphs, about to gain the whole world by virtue of the one pact she was minded to keep, which she had signed with her blood." And: "The monstrous national perversion which held the Continent, and more than the Continent, in its grip, has celebrated its orgies down to the bitter end. My tale is hastening to its end—like all else today. Everything rushes and presses on, the world stands within sight of its end—at least it does for us Germans. Our 'thousand-year' history refuted, reduced *ad absurdum*, weighed in the balance and found unblest, turns out to be a road leading nowhere, or rather into despair, an unexampled bankruptcy, a *descensus Averno* lighted by the dance of roaring flames."

But that is not the end of the book. He ends it with this: "A lonely man folds his hands and speaks: 'God be merciful to thy poor soul, my friend, my Fatherland!'"

With that, he fuses Adrian Leverkühn and Germany together. As a single entity, the great artist and the ruined German nation are Dr Faustus.

The book leaves unanswered the questions it asks:

Is genius a kind of madness?

Do great artists redeem a nation, or does a nation's atrocities sully, devalue, diminish the works of its artists?

Can great art emerge only out of Dionysian instinct?

To that, perhaps Thomas Mann's novel *Dr. Faustus* provides a credible answer in itself. It is, triumphantly, an Apollonian work of art.

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[1] The Swiss mountain town where Thomas Mann's novel *The Magic Mountain* is set—chiefly in a sanitorium for sufferers from tuberculosis—is Davos. Davos is now the annual meeting place of the World Economic Forum which threatens the world with the "Great Reset," so the mountain retains its ominous reputation.

[2] The film *Death in Venice* has a composer as its protagonist (and background music by Mahler). But in Thomas Mann's story with that title, the protagonist, Gustave Aschenbach, is a writer. The film takes ideas from *Dr. Faustus* and blends them with ideas and events from *Death in Venice*, making a composite figure of Aschenbach and Leverkühn. In Thomas Mann's written story, Aschenbach "taught a whole grateful generation that a man can still be capable of moral resolution even after he has plumbed the [evil] depths of knowledge"; but he goes to his death, in splendid, decaying, diseased Venice, self-abased by a hopeless, doctrinally sinful, lustful love for a beautiful boy. "Mind and heart were drunk with passion, his footsteps guided by the demonic power whose pastime it is to trample on human reason and dignity."

[3] The scene in which the Devil appears to Adrian Leverkühn closely resembles a scene in the *The Brother Karamazov* in which the Devil appears to Ivan Karamazov. Brain-infected Adrian and mind-tormented Ivan are each alone in his living-room when he suddenly sees the Devil seated on a sofa—an "ugly customer," "not a gentleman" to Adrian; "a gentleman" to Ivan, but one who has come down in the world, his jacket well cut but unfashionable and threadbare, his linen "rather dirty." Each is irritated by his apparition, argues angrily with him, mocks him but cannot dismiss him. There are so many similarities, it is impossible not to conclude that with this episode Thomas Mann deliberately imitated Dostoyevsky.

[4] Friedrich Nietzsche—who became infected with syphilis, probably intentionally in order to become a genius—expounded the idea, arising from Greek mythology, that a work of art could be either Dionysian (from the name of the Greek god of wine Dionysos) or Apollonian (from Apollo, god of the sun). "Dionysian" connotes intoxication, enthusiasm ecstasy, mystery, darkness, passion, intuition, instinct, wildness, chaos, savagery, tribal community and derangement—all features of Romanticism. "Apollonian" connotes sobriety, thought, reason, rationality, law, logic, light, order, science, civilization, individual autonomy, freedom and sanity—all values of the Enlightenment. Nietzsche (see *The Birth of Tragedy*), Richard Wagner, and Adolf Hitler passionately preferred the Dionysian to the Apollonian.

[5] All quotations are from the English translation of the novel by H.T. Lowe-Porter.

[6] Leverkühn is modeled on no actual composer, though a number are mentioned. Among them is Schoenberg, as he makes use of the twelve-tone chromatic scale. Some parts of his compositions are compared to some parts of Stravinsky's. And his last work, *The Lamentation of Dr. Faustus*, though recalling in "spirit and inflexions" Monteverdi's *Lamento*, is described as an "Ode to Sorrow," a deliberate opposite to Beethoven's ninth symphony "Ode to Joy." Thomas Mann would surely have expected Wagner to be in everyone's mind when the music is described as "heaving with hellish emotion," but Leverkühn is very different from Wagner. His works *express, reflect, and lament* the demonic nature of Nazism, but it is never suggested that he inspires it as Wagner did. One of the ideas that Hitler took from Richard Wagner, was that the "pure Aryan" lived by instinct, by the "dictates of the blood", and that thought, reason, rationality, law, logic, light, order, science, civilization, individual freedom, autonomy, and sanity were contemptible bourgeois things.

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Jillian Becker writes both fiction and non-fiction. Her first novel, *The Keep*, is now a Penguin Modern Classic. Her best known work of non-fiction is *Hitler's Children: The Story of the Baader-Meinhof Terrorist Gang*, an international best-seller and Newsweek (Europe) Book of the Year 1977. She was Director of the London-based Institute for the Study of Terrorism 1985-1990, and on the subject of terrorism contributed to TV and radio current affairs programs in Britain, the US, Canada, and Germany. Among her published studies of terrorism is *The PLO: the Rise and Fall of the Palestine Liberation Organization*. Her articles on various subjects have been published in newspapers and periodicals on both sides of the Atlantic, among them *Commentary, The New Criterion, The Wall Street Journal* (Europe), *Encounter, The Times* (UK), *The Telegraph Magazine*, and *Standpoint*. She was born in South Africa but made her home in London. All her early books were banned or embargoed in the land of her birth while it was under an all-white government. In 2007 she moved to California to be near two of her three daughters and four of her six grandchildren. Her website is www.theatheistconservative.com.

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